

# Gangsta Rap as Political and Rhetorical Discourse

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## Abstract

Gangsta rap played an essential and highly complex role in shaping rhetorical and political discourse surrounding the criminal justice system in the mid 1980s and 1990s during the War on Crime Era. It became a vernacular tool for resistance, giving influence and power to minority voices.

## Mark of Criminality

The “mark of criminality” refers to how the notion of blackness was tied to criminality to the point of being considered practically one in the same, as young African American men in low income areas were associated most closely with crime and were subjected to continuous surveillance and frequent detention.

With the appearance of gangsta rap on the cultural scene, black musicians flipped the “mark of criminality” on its head, as what once was a means for discrimination became the root of their ethos. The “mark of criminality” was harnessed by African Americans as a cultural and political resource, and a rising source of revenue.

## Rhetoric of Gangsta Rap

### Gangsta Rap:

The rhetoric of gangsta rap was expressed by artists like NWA who parodied the dominant representations of African American criminality, mocking the states’ surveillance strategies in their communities, while portraying themselves as hypermasculine heroes. Gangsta Rap’s in-your-face lyrical style is marked by violence, sex, drugs, and anti-cop sentiments—topics that the nation feared and associated with the “badmen” archetype. These topics were playfully and satirically portrayed, forming antithesis to law and order rhetoric.

### G-Funk:

The g-funk movement diverged from gangsta rap, as it focused on validating black culture, style, and leisure activities, rather than political or anit-cop rheotric. It glorified the criminalized status of African Americans, portraying black on black violence over black on white violence, drawing on themes of materialism, substance abuse, and the objectification of women in the black community. The “mark of criminality” was refashioned from a political message to a celebration of black culture and leisure time activities. Due to the lack of coherence in gangsta rap artists’ interpretation of the “mark of criminality,” as well as the absence of political mobilization outside of the production of records, the cultural politics regarding race and criminality was destined to fail.

## Signifyin(g) Theory

Henry Louis Gates’ postmodern theory of Signifyin(g) is helpful when analyzing the rhetoric of gangsta rap, as this theory helps make sense of the shifts and disparity in the meanings of the “mark of criminality” and what it represents for different groups over time.

“**Signifyin(g)** implies the art of expressing ideas, opinions, feelings, and so forth, by indirection and is, therefore, a culturally specific form of irony. One who signifies says without explicitly saying, criticizes without actually criticizing, insults without really insulting” (*Oxford Companion to African American Literature*).

**Masking** is a rhetorical technique related to Signifyin(g), which involves presenting the face expected by a powerful audience, as a form of self-protection and subversion. Gangsta rap harnessed the myth of the “dangerous black man” to communicate with their white and black audiences under a parodic lens.

The practices of Signifyin(g) and Masking are apparent in the gangsta rebel, who illustrates how urban violence in African American communities came to signify victimization and righteous retaliation.

## Straight Outta Compton - N.W.A.

### Signifyin(g) in Gangsta Rap Lyrics:

“**See, ‘cause I’m the motherf\*ing villain / The definition is clear, you’re the witness of a killin’**”  
Parodies the typical law and order interpretation of the “mark of criminality,” by sarcastically affirming this stereotype, while also comically acting as a metaphor for their use of rhymes as a weapon.

“**I see a motherf\*ing cop, I don’t dodge him”**  
An attempt to shift the power dynamics between law enforcement and the African American community they are surveilling. The police are depicted as fools, while the members of N.W.A. are the heroes.

Lyrics and music videos affirmed popular conceptions of urban life, while also rallying members of African American communities to affirm and celebrate the realities of their community and identity.



Above: Image from 2015 film *Straight Outta Compton*  
Left: Members of N.W.A.

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## The Next Episode - Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg

### Signifyin(g) in G-Funk Lyrics:

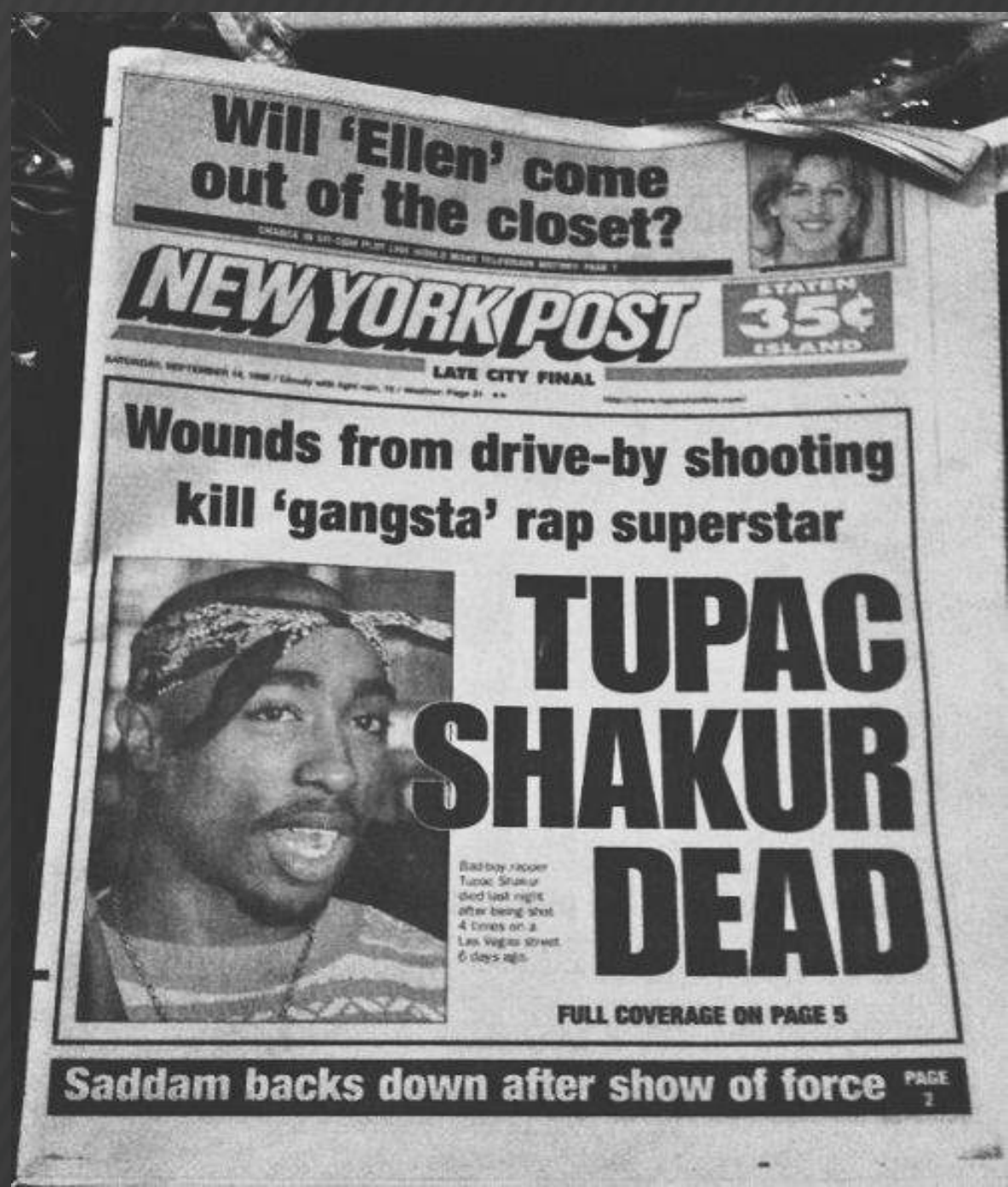
Snoop Dogg declares he’s “**mobbin with the D.R.E.**,” using the word ‘mobbin’, which has violent connotations, as a metaphor for his mobilizing behind Dr. Dre’s music.

The ambiguity in meaning is seen in the multiple interpretations of references to “**doggystyle**” in the song as well, which could express the misogynistic connotations characteristic of g-funk, or could also be indicating a social criticism, as Snoop Dog refers to himself sarcastically as a dog.

Lyrics such as “**bang this in the club,**” reveal the use signified meaning as bang is both a gangsta metaphor and a reference to gunshots.

Similarly, the mention of “**Crips**” can signify the gang or a popular dance move at the time.

Ambiguous language and tropes are utilized extensively in g-funk, allowing for some of the same messages present in gangsta rap to echo, but presenting them in a less “in your face” way. This shift in rhetorical style and focus on depicting a glorified picture of African Americans life in urban communities in a way that was less politicized, contributed to the greater success of g-funk with white audiences.



Far left: Snoop Dogg posed next to car  
Left: Sept. 14, 1996 New York Post

## Reception

### Gangsta rap:

**Positive:** Gangsta Rap challenged the idea held by much of the white community that methods of combating crime in black communities, such as surveillance, were necessary and effective in combatting criminality, as well as the prevailing war on crime sentiments, by glorifying criminality and demonizing the police force presence in their communities. Some saw the release of “Straight Outta Compton” and similar tracks as a way to voice the African American community’s economic woes and troubled interactions with law enforcement.

**Negative:** Releases such as “Straight Outta Compton” seemed to confirm the link between criminality and urban African American communities and the perception that mass surveillance and incarceration were needed. Many argued that gangsta rap was not a playful undermining of law-and-order rhetoric, but rather a threat to the social order.

### G-Funk:

**Positive:** G-funk arose after the backlash following the release of “Straight Outta Compton” and was less feared and more widely accepted by the nation as a whole. G-funk appealed to white male youth more than socially conscious rap, because it advocated masculinist pleasures and youth rebellion rather than criticism of racial discrimination. Broadened consumer demographics made artists like Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre millionaires.

**Negative:** The g-funk movement broke the unity of the community of gangsta rap artists, as labels profited from the violent and criminalized content of recordings, and the artists themselves began to live the type of lives glorified in their lyrics. This concerned many opponents of this genre of rap who took issue with the message and violent lyrics characterizing this genre and a growing trend of real violence and criminality by the artists themselves.

## Application

I contend that while the faults of gangsta rap must not be ignored, gangsta rap successfully raised awareness and created Kairos for anti-prison and antiracist politics during the War on Crime era, as the “mark of criminality” was reinterpreted by black artists.

This rhetoric can be influential today, as we consider solutions to mass incarceration. Today, the United States has the highest percentage of adult incarceration relative to its population worldwide. According to a Pew Center analysis, African Americans were more than six times as likely to be incarcerated in federal and state prisons compared to white men in 2010. Author Michelle Alexander has argued this is “the new Jim Crow.”

**When seeking solutions, we must listen to the rhetoric of marginalized voices in context, even when presented in a form that makes us apprehensive, such as gangsta rap.**

